DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 226 263 CG 016 455

AUTHOR Tesser, Abraham; Campbell, Jennifer
TITLE Changes in Self-Definition: A Self-Evaluation Maintenance Strategy.
SPONS AGENCY National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Aug 82
GRANT NSF-BNS-8003711
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (90th, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; *Congruence (Psychology); Emotional Response; Models; Performance Factors; Personality Change; Psychology; *Self Concept; Self Concept Measures; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); Situational Tests; *Social Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Self Evaluation Maintenance Model

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model (SEM), developed by psychologists to learn more about stability and change in self-definition. An initial section discusses the situational-motivational processes assumed necessary for individuals to maintain a positive self-evaluation, i.e., a reflection process and a comparison process. Experimental tests of the model along with research results are explained. An interpretational questions, dealing with public versus private self-evaluation maintenance, is discussed. A final section discusses the SEM model in relation to other approaches to self-definition, i.e., the situational and the ontogenetic. Directions for future research are indicated. (PAS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED226263

Changes in Self-Definition: A Self-Evaluation Maintenance Strategy*

Abraham Tesser and Jennifer Campbell

University of Georgia

Symposium on Self-Originating Change and Maintenance of the Self

American Psychological Association

Washington, D.C.

1982

*We gratefully acknowledge the support of NSF grant BNS-8003711.

CG 016455

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Abraham Tesser

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Recently, we have distinguished four prototypic approaches that psychologists have taken to understanding stability and change in self-definition (Tesser and Campbell, in press). These approaches are defined by (1) the mechanism of change--change may be the result of cognitive/perceptual mechanisms or change may be the result of motivational mechanisms; and (2) the origins of self-definition--ontogenetic or situational. The ontogenetic-cognitive approach assumes that one's self-definition is the result of a developmental process involving interaction with the environment which, over time, results in stable cognitive structures concerning the self. A prototypic theorist is Piaget. A prototypic ontogenetic-motivational theorist is Freud. This approach assumes that self-definition is the result of the successful/unsuccessful unfolding of a developmental sequence in which motives, and the conflict among motives is crucial. The situational-cognitive approach has enjoyed some recent popularity in the theories of Bem and Schachter. It assumes that one's self-definition is the result of an inference from one's behavior taking account of the situation in which it occurs. Finally, the situational-motivational approach assumes that one's self-definition is the result of an attempt to satisfy a motive such as maintaining a positive view of self or creating a positive impression in others in a particular, contemporary set of circumstances. Our own work is most closely associated with this latter approach.

THE SELF-EVALUATION MAINTENANCE MODEL

We assume that persons are motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation. We further assume that one's self-evaluation is strongly influenced by social circumstances. According to the self-evaluation maintenance model (SEM), social circumstances exert their influence through two complementary processes, a reflection process and a comparison process. Each of these processes depends on the performance and the psychological closeness of another in a particular situation. The relative importance of these processes is determined by the relevance of the performance dimension to one's own self-definition.

Most of us, at one time or another, have "bragged" about our cousin the great brain surgeon, or our neighbor who was in the olympics, etc. (Cialdini, et. al. 1976). These are examples of the reflection process. At times all of us take pride in the accomplishments of others. In order to take pride in the accomplishment of others two things are necessary: The other's performance has to be relatively good and we must, in some sense, be associated with or close to that other. If either of these conditions is not met there will be little to be gained by reflection.

A close relationship with someone who performs well on some dimension can raise one's self evaluation via the reflection process. It is just as plausible to assume, however, that being in close association with someone who performs well can make one's own performance look bad by comparison. Such circumstances could lead to lowered self-evaluation. Notice that the comparison process depends on exactly the same combination of performance and closeness as the reflection process. If the other person's performance is mediocre or if there is no association with the other person (and comparison is thereby rendered difficult), there will be little threat to self-evaluation by comparison.

If both reflection and comparison depend on performance and closeness in the same way and reflection leads to heightened self-evaluation and comparison leads to lowered self evaluation then the effects of the processes would cancel themselves out. However, both processes are not assumed to be equally important. Their relative importance depends on the extent to which the performance dimension is important or relevant to the individual's own self-definition. If the other is performing on a dimension which is highly relevant to the individual, he will tend to suffer by comparison to a close other's good performance. If the other is performing on a dimension which is not relevant to the individual, he will take pride in the reflection of a close other's good performance.

The model assumes that persons will alter closeness, relative performance, or their own self-definition in order to maintain a positive self-evaluation. For

purposes of this symposium, we will be concerned with change in self-definition, the relevance component of the model. Specific predictions can be made if we assume that closeness and performance are fixed. Recall that one's self-definition determines the relative importance of the reflection and comparison processes. If reflection processes are important then the better another's performance the more one would gain in self-evaluation particularly if that other is close; if comparison processes are important then the better another's performance the more one would lose in self-evaluation particularly if that other is close. Therefore, the model predicts that the better another's (relative) performance on a particular dimension, the less self-definitional that dimension will be to the individual. And, the relationship between other's performance and own self-definition will be more pronounced with increasing closeness of the other person.

Experimental Tests of the Model

Tesser and Campbell (1980) tested these hypotheses by giving female subjects an opportunity to perform on a "social sensitivity" task and on an "esthetic judgment" task with a female confederate. Some subjects were lead to believe that the confederate was very similar to them in terms of personality characteristics, academic major, year in school, and family background (i.e., close); other subjects were led to believe that the confederate was very dissimilar (i.e., distant). Each subject learned that she and the confederate performed at the same level (below average) on one task. On the other task, the subject's absolute level of performance was a little better (average), but the confederate's absolute level of performance was much better (clearly above average). In sum, subjects learned their performance was poor but identical to that of the confederate on one task and average but inferior to that of the confederate on the other task.

There were three dependent measures of self-definition: (a) choice of task subjects prefer to work on further. (b) An interview regarding self-definition. (c) Pre- to post change in rating of the relevance of both task dimensions to subjects'

self-definition. The results supported the hypotheses on the choice measure and the change in relevance measure but not on the interview measure. Subjects reduced the relevance of the dimension on which the confederate outperformed them. Further, this effect was more pronounced in the similar condition (close) than the dissimilar condition (distant). This was true despite the fact that the task on which the confederate outperformed the subject was also the task on which the subject herself performed better in an absolute sense. Thus, subjects' self-definitions moved away from the task on which they themselves did better (absolute performance) and towards the task on which their relative performance was better.

Public vs. private self-evaluation maintenance. The Tesser and Campbell study raised an interpretational question that is important not only for the model but generally for research on the self. Did the subjects' behavior reflect attempts to maintain private self-evaluation or did it simply reflect attempts to evoke a positive evaluation from the experimenter (impression management)? The fact that the interview measure (taken by an interviewer who was not present during the experimental manipulations) did not show the predicted effects but the choice measure (taken by the experimenter) did show the effects is consistent with an impression management interpretation.

Tesser and Paulhus (in press) designed a study which addressed the public/private issue and provided a conceptual replication of the Tesser and Campbell results. Male subjects were scheduled in pairs. Some were told they had been paired together because they were very similar (close) to one another while others were told they had been paired together because they were very dissimilar (distant). Subjects worked on two tasks measuring their "cognitive perceptual ability" or CPI and were given feedback that clearly indicated that one of them had performed better than the other. They were then interviewed by another experimenter. Regardless of their "actual" performance, half of the subjects were led to believe that the interviewer thought that they had performed better than did the other subject while the remaining subjects were

led to believe that the interviewer thought the other subject had performed better. The study included three measures of the importance of CPI to self-definition: the amount of time spent looking at the biographies of high CPI persons (surreptitiously recorded), rated importance of CPI in the interview, and rated importance of CPI on a final questionnaire.

If changing self-definition is a private self-evaluation maintenance strategy then "actual" relative performance should be consequential; if changing self-definition is a public-image management strategy then the audience's (i.e., the interviewer's) beliefs about relative performance should be consequential. The results suggest that changing self-definition serves both a private self-evaluation maintenance and a public self-presentational function.

Regardless of what the interviewer professed to believe about their performance, subjects who believed they actually outperformed the other participant reported that CPI was more relevant to their self-definition than subjects who were outperformed by the other. Furthermore, the private performance effect was more pronounced in the similar condition (close other) than the dissimilar condition (distant other). Public beliefs about relative performance (i.e., what the interviewer believed) also affected relevance. CPI became more relevant to the self-definition of subjects who believed that the interviewer thought they had outperformed the confederate (regardless of the subjects' view of actual performance) than to subjects who believed the interviewer thought their performance was inferior to the confederate's. However, this public performance effect was not more pronounced with the similar (close) confederate.

The results of the "actual" performance manipulation, in conjunction with the results of the Tesser and Campbell (1980a) study, provide complementary support for the SEM predictions. Both studies indicate that an attribute is made less relevant to the extent that an individual is outperformed by another on that attribute, particularly if the other is similar. The Tesser and Paulhus results also suggest that changing self-definition may serve to affect both private and public evaluation: self-evalua-

tion maintenance and image-management processes can and do operate concurrently.

The Plasticity of Self

The research we reviewed suggests that the self is changeable but just how changeable is the self? Which aspects of the self are changeable? In putting the SEM model into perspective, we divided approaches to self-definition into situational and ontogenetic. These approaches differ greatly in their answers to these questions. The situational approach assumes great plasticity in the self with those changes being controlled by the ever-changing, present circumstances an individual is experiencing. The ontogenetic approach assumes that the core of self is laid down relatively early in life and is greatly resistant to change.

There are data supporting both positions. So, how are we to reconcile this apparent conflict and how does the SEM model fit into such a resolution? We believe that different aspects of the self are differentially susceptible to change. We make a distinction between emotional and performance dimensions of self-definition. Emotional dimensions are dimensions on which differential performance is not particularly valued. That is, persons in the same family can have similar preferences for food and religion; they may have similar levels of emotional expressiveness, etc. To the extent there is such a thing as "good performance" on these dimensions, it lies not in being different from close others but in being similar to close others. For a variety of reasons, children quickly adopt the valued, modal behavior on emotional dimensions. We expect that the components of an individual's self-definition on emotional dimensions are quite resistant to change. Because they tend to be affective, they will be relatively impervious to "persuasion" attempts; because they tend to be adopted relatively early, they will be associated with a greater number of supportive experiences than aspects of the self adopted later; and, because an individual's positions on these dimensions tend to make him/her similar to close others, those positions will have a strong support system.

In contrast to emotional dimensions, performance dimensions are dimensions on which differences in behavior are rewarded. For example, it is the fastest runner, or the best clockmaker, or the most beautiful woman who is rewarded, not the average runner, clockmaker, or woman. Further, to the extent that persons are close, i.e., from the same household, of the same sex, etc., the differential in reinforcement will be more salient. Performance dimensions of self-definition should be more malleable than emotional dimensions. This is not to say, however, that there is not resistance to change on performance dimensions. Over time individuals are likely to have made a substantial investment in the way of practice and time to particular dimensions. Change in the face of such investments could produce dissonance. Second, one's self-definition on performance dimensions is often public and may serve as a commitment to that self-definition. And, commitment also attentuates change. We are currently planning some research which addresses these hypotheses.

References

Cialdini, R. B., Borden, R. J., Thorne, A., Walker, M. R., Freeman, S. & Sloan, L. R. Basking in reflected glory: Three (football) field studies. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1976, 34, 366-375.

Tesser, A. & Campbell, J. Self-definition and self-evaluation maintenance. In J. Suls & A. Greenwald (Eds.) Social Psychological Perspectives on the Self (Vol. 2), in press.

Tesser, A. & Campbell, J. Self-definition: The impact of the relative performance and similarity of others. Social Psychology Quarterly, 1980, 43, 341-347.

Tesser, A. & Paulhus, D. The definition of self: Private and public self-evaluation management strategies. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, in press.